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America's favourite whipping boy back in favour

# Once despised CIA is now well on way to throwing off its shackles

From David Cross  
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Mr George Bush, a leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination, is proud of his record of public service, and not least of his short tenure as a former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency some four years ago.

Indeed, he tells his audiences on the election campaign trail, it is time for people like him to speak up and tell the world what a vital job the CIA is doing. "We've got to get off their backs. We are up against a tough adversary (the Soviet Union) and we have to have the best intelligence service money can buy", he says to thunderous applause from Republican supporters.

On the other side of the political fence, too, there is broad support among Democrats for the removal of some of the shackles which have bound the agency since the early 1970s when revelations of assassination plots, secret wars, drug experiments and the like made it the favourite whipping boy of all but a handful of apologists.

In his State of the Union message last month, President Carter said: "We need clear and quick passage of a new charter to define the legal authority and accountability of our intelligence agencies. We will guarantee that abuses do not recur, but we must tighten our controls on sensitive intelligence information and we need to remove unwarranted restraints on America's ability to collect intelligence".

Mr Carter's appeal for a comprehensive charter to spell out the powers and limitations of the CIA and the other secret services was made in the context of his Administration's response to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Like his proposal to register potential military conscripts, the President believes that a relaxation of some of the constraints on the CIA will improve



Admiral Stansfield Turner: Outspoken CIA director

the country's ability "to protect and preserve" its security against any future Soviet threats.

In fact, the gradual rehabilitation of the once despised CIA was under way well before Soviet troops were airlifted into Kabul. It started with a growing perception among members of Congress and other influential members of the American political and business establishment that too much publicity about the agency's work would only undermine its effectiveness.

As long ago as 1975, for example, in the midst of the congressional disclosures about CIA wrongdoings, Mr Richard Welch, the CIA station chief in Athens, was murdered after his name had been listed in an anti-CIA publication. The ensuing controversy which still goes on between opponents and supporters of the agency about the circumstances surrounding his death has undoubtedly played a significant part in the rehabilitation process.

In recent months, the shortcomings of the intelligence services, particularly the CIA, have become more apparent as foreign crisis has followed foreign crisis.

The net result has been the tabling of various pieces of legislation in Congress in recent weeks which both the legislature and the executive branches of government hope will produce a new rule book for the intelligence services before the end of the year.

Attention so far has focused on a draft charter drawn up by the Senate's select committee on intelligence.

Its most controversial point, as far as the CIA and the Administration are concerned, is that it would require the President to give prior notice of covert intelligence operations to at least eight members of Congress even in a national emergency. Not surprisingly, the intelligence services are bitterly opposed to any such rigid requirement.

Although it is the most liberal version of the various Bills now before Congress, it has already been described by left-wing groups as a "threat to civil liberties".

Such criticism comes as no surprise but there is deep concern that pressure of time during the present session of Congress may lead to the comprehensive charter being dropped in favour of a much more limited set of rules for the CIA. Such a move might give the agency all the new powers it wants without any of the constraints contained in the full-scale charter.

This seems unlikely, however, since leaders of Congress are still anxious to ensure some control over the operations of the intelligence community.

This was made very clear last week when Admiral Stansfield Turner, the outspoken Director of the CIA, admitted during a hearing on Capitol Hill that some secret missions had been undertaken recently without prior warning to Congress.

Mr Robert Byrd, the Senate Democratic leader, said that this revelation worried him: "The CIA should not be given carte blanche", he insisted.